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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000224

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/18/2015

TAGS: [PREF](#) [BG](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#)

SUBJECT: BIHARI UPDATE

REF: 04 DHAKA 02463

Classified By: Polcouns D.C. McCullough for reason para 1.5d

1. (SBU) Summary: While Bihari spokesmen continue to press for resettlement in Pakistan, many Biharis are integrating themselves into local life and say they want Bangladeshi citizenship. End Summary.

Background

2. (SBU) The Biharis are an internally displaced group of Urdu-speaking people who supported Pakistan in the 1971 war of independence. They are neither Bangladeshi nor Pakistani citizens, and now number about 300,000 in 68 camps throughout Bangladesh. Many Biharis have jobs on the local economy and educate their children, illegally, in Bangladeshi schools. The self-appointed spokesmen of the Biharis, the Stranded Pakistanis General Repatriation Committee (SPGRC), are based in Dhaka and insist the only solution for Biharis is resettlement in Pakistan.

3. (SBU) In 1971, the BDG, in a gesture to national reconciliation, offered Bangladeshi citizenship to the Biharis. The Biharis declined believing they would return to Pakistan soon and settled in camps in Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Saidpur, and Ishurdi. These camps, popularly known as Geneva camps, were set up under the Geneva Convention and initially run by the International Red Cross. Almost half the Bihari population made it over the years to Pakistan, which in 1993 declared an end Bihari emigration. In 2003, a Bangladeshi High Court ruling granted 10 Biharis voting rights.

Current Situation

4. (SBU) On January 13, Poloff and Pol FSN visited the largest camp in Dhaka, Geneva Camp, and a neighboring smaller camp, Community Center Camp. The camps resemble normal Bangladeshi slum neighborhoods, with uncontrolled access, no fencing, and no special security. With few latrines for the entire camp, sanitation is poor and crowding is severe. Many Biharis have jobs or run small shops outside the camps. In a random sampling, inhabitants--including three mothers with children--stated that Biharis and some Bengalis rent homes in the camps from Biharis who have semi-ownership of the plots.

5. (SBU) The BDG provides free electricity and water supply, along with 3 kg of wheat per person per month. However, camp residents said, food rations are irregular and stopped several months ago. Camp residents and SPGRC spokesmen separately stated there was previously small aid from Islamist NGO's like Rabita Trust and Muslim Aid, but now there are no international organizations or NGO's providing comprehensive services to Biharis.

6. (SBU) Recently, Poloff met with Nigel McCollum, a city councillor from England, who is spending a month in Bangladesh investigating the Bihari situation as the representative of a group of concerned British politicians called the Dhaka Initiative. The group, McCollum said, wants to raise awareness about the Biharis with international donors, the European Commission, and local diplomatic missions to put pressure on the BDG to do more for the Biharis.

7. (C) In a review of camp conditions, McCollum asserted that the camps are becoming a recruiting ground for Islamic extremist groups and that Rabita Trust and other Islamist NGO's have given substantial aid to Biharis. On January 19, a German-Filipino missionary couple who has been doing vocational training with the Biharis for seven years told Poloff that Kuwati and Saudi NGO's reportedly provide aid to the camps.

8. (C) At a small madrassah in Geneva camp that seemed to teach mostly young boys and girls, in Urdu and Arabic, the teacher identified education and health care as the Biharis most pressing problems. The teacher, a Bihari who lives outside the camps, stated there was no NGO or local political

party presence in the camps.

9.(SBU) Poloff also met with UNHCR Bangladesh Deputy Representative Mulusew Mamo, who stated that UNHCR has little knowledge about the Biharis. UNHCR, he said, could do nothing for Biharis because they are not an official refugee group. .

10. (SBU) SPGRC spokesmen reiterated to poloff that only resettlement in Pakistan could resolve their situation, but that they receive no cooperation from the BDG or GOP. McCollum and the missionary couple alleged that the SPGRC wants to stick with the status quo because they make money out of the current situation by skimming off NGO and other aid for Biharis. Camp residents, however, insisted that the great majority of Biharis recognize that Pakistan is not an option and prefer to stay in Bangladesh and take up Bangladeshi citizenship (reftel). Younger Biharis were particularly adamant that their future is in Bangladesh, that they were born in Banglades and speak better Bangla than Urdu.

Comment

11. (C) There's a logic to the allegation that Islamists are active in Bihari camps, which presumably contain at least some disaffected young Muslims who feel alienated from the Bangladeshi mainstream. However, we are unaware of any specific corroborating evidence, and note that the radical Islam card is often played here in a bid to generate international engagement. When Poloff visited the Dhaka camps, there were no obvious manifestations of Islamist activity -- posters, literature, or "special areas." However, the Urdu and Arabic curriculum of the small madrassah at Geneva camp suggests an affiliation with so-called qawmi mosques, which support radical Islamist groups like IOJ, instead of the more mainstream aliyah mosques which have links to the BDG. In 2004, pursuant to UN sanctions, the BDG closed the Bangladesh office of Rabita Trust; we are unaware of any continuing Rabita Trust presence in Bangladesh.

THOMAS